

THE Masquerader

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Author of "The Circle," Etc.

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[CONTINUED.]

Chilcote started; then, suddenly becoming inflamed with the other's manner, he echoed the laugh.

"By Jove," he said, "you're right! You're quite right. A man must keep his feet in their own groove." Raising his hand, he began to fumble with his

But Leder kept the same position. "You'll find the check book in its usual place," he said. "I've made one day of £100, pay for the first week. The rest can stand over until— He yawned sleepily.

Chilcote shifted his position. "Don't talk about that. It upsets me to anticipate. I can make out a check to-morrow payable to John Leder."

"No. That can wait. The name of Leder is better out of the book. We can't be too careful." Leder spoke with unusual impetuosity. Already a slight, unreasonable jealousy was coloring his thoughts. Already he grinded the idea of Chilcote with his unstable glance and restless fingers opening the drawers and sorting the papers that for one stupendous fortnight had been his without question. Turning aside, he changed the subject brusquely.

"Come into the bedroom," he said. "It's half past 7 if it's a minute, and the Charrington's show is at 9." Without waiting for a reply, he walked across the room and held the door open.

There was no silence while they exchanged clothes. Leder talked continuously, sometimes in short, curt sentences, sometimes with ironic touches

of humor; he talked until Chilcote, strangely affected by contact with another personality after his weeks of solitude, felt under his influence, his excitement rising, his imagination strung at the novelty of change. At last, garbed once more in the clothes of his own world, he passed from the bedroom back into the sitting room and there halted, waiting for his companion.

Almost directly Leder followed. He came into the room quietly and, moving at once to the table, picked up the checkbook.

"I'm not going to preach," he began, "so you needn't shut me up. But I'll say just one thing—a thing that will get said. Try to keep your hold! Remember your responsibilities and keep your hold!" He spoke energetically, looking earnestly into Chilcote's eyes. He did not realize it, but he was leading for his own career.

Chilcote paled a little, as he always did in face of a reality. Then he extended his hand.

"My dear fellow," he said, with a touch of hauteur, "a man can generally be trusted to look after his own life."

Extending his hand almost immediately, he turned toward the door and without a word of farewell passed into the little hall, leaving Leder alone in the sitting room.

CHAPTER XII.

ON the night of Chilcote's return to his own Leder tasted the lees of life poignantly for the first time. Before their curious compact had been entered upon he had been, if not content, at least apathetic; but with action the apathy had been dispersed, never again to regain its old position.

He realized with bitter certainty that his was no real home coming. On entering Chilcote's house he had experienced none of the unfamiliarity, none of the unsettled awkwardness, that assailed him now. There he had almost secured the exile returning after many hardships; here, in the atmosphere made common by years, he felt an alien. It was illustrative of the man's character that sentimentalities found no place in his nature. Sentiments were not lacking, though they lay out of sight, but sentimentalities he altogether denied.

Left alone in the sitting room after Chilcote's departure, his first sensation was one of physical discomfort and unfamiliarity. His own clothes, with their worn looseness, brought no sense of friendliness such as some men find in an old garment. Lounging and the clothes that suggested lounging had no appeal for him. In his eyes the garb that implies responsibility was symbolic and even inspiring.

And as with clothes so with his actual surroundings. Each detail of his room was familiar, but not one had ever become intimately close. He had used the place for years, but he had used it as he might use a hotel, and whatever of his household gods had come with him remained, like himself, on a prostrate. His entrance into Chil-

cote's surroundings had been altogether different. Unknown to himself, he had been in the position of a young artist who, having roughly modeled in clay, is brought into the studio of a sculptor. To his outward vision everything is new, but his inner sight leaps to instant understanding. Amid all the strangeness he recognizes the one essential—the workshop, the atmosphere, the home.

On this first night of return Leder comprehended something of his position, and, comprehending, he faced the problem and fought with it.

He had made his bargain and must pay his share. Weighing this, he had looked about his room with a quiet gaze. Then at last, as if finding the object really sought for, his eyes had come round to the mantelpiece and rested on the pipe rack. The pipes stood precisely as he had left them. He had looked at them for a long time, then an ironic expression that was almost a smile had touched his lips, and, crossing the room, he had taken the oldest and blackest from its place and slowly filled it with tobacco.

With the first withdrawn breath of smoke his attitude had unbenumbed. Without conscious determination he had chosen the one factor capable of causing his mood. A cigarette is for the trivial moments of life; a cigar for its fulfillments, its pleasant, comfortable retrospections; but in real distress—in the solving of a question, the fighting of a difficulty—a pipe is man's eternal solace.

So he had passed the first night of his return to the actualities of life.



"You would not desert me?"

Next day his mind was somewhat settled, and outward aid was not so essential; but, though facts faced him more soundly, they were nevertheless very drab in shade. The necessity for work, that blessed antidote to ennui, no longer forced him to endeavor. He was no longer penniless, but the money he possessed brought with it no desires. When a man has lived from hand to mouth for years and suddenly finds himself with £100 in his pocket the result is sometimes curious. He finds with a vague sense of surprise that he has forgotten how to spend. That extravagance, like other artificial passions, requires cultivation.

This he realized even more fully on the days that followed the night of his first return, and with it was born a new bitterness. The man who has friends and no money may find life difficult, but the man who has money and no friend to rejoice in his fortune or benefit by his generosity is aloof indeed. With the loven of incredulity that works in all strong natures, Leder distrusted the professional beggar; therefore the charity that bestows easily and promiscuously was denied him, and of other channels of generosity he was too self contained to have learned the secret.

When depression falls upon a man of usually even temperament it descends with a double weight. The mercurial nature has a hundred counterbalancing devices to rid itself of gloom—a sudden lifting of spirit, a memory of other moods lived through, other blacknesses dispersed by time, but the man of level nature has none of these. Depression when it comes is indeed depression; no phase of mind to be superseded by another phase, but a sickening of all the chords of life.

It was through such a depression as this that he labored during three

weeks, while no summons and no hint of remembrance came from Chilcote. His position was peculiarly difficult. He found no action in the present, and toward the future he dared not trust himself to look. He had slipped the old moorings that familiarity had rendered endurable, but, having slipped them, he had found no substitute. Such was his case on the last night of the three weeks and such his frame of mind as he crossed Fleet street from Cliffe's inn to Middle Temple lane.

It was scarcely 7 o'clock, but already the dusk was falling. The greater press of vehicles had ceased, and the light of the street lamps gleamed back from the spaces of dry and polished roadway, worn smooth as a mirror by wheels and hoofs. Something of the solitude of night that sits so ill on the strenuous city street was making itself felt, though the throngs of people on the pathway still streamed eastward and westward, and the taverns made a busy trade.

Having crossed the roadway, Leder paused for a moment to survey the scene. But humanity in the abstract made small appeal to him, and his glance wandered from the passersby to the buildings massed like clouds against the dark sky. As his gaze moved slowly from one to the other a clock near at hand struck 7, and an instant later the chorus was taken up by a dozen clamorous tongues. Usually he scarcely heard and never heeded these innumerable chimes, but this evening their effect was strange. Coming out of the darkness, they seemed to possess a personal note, a human declaration. The impression was fantastic, but it was strong. With a species of revolt against life and his own personality, he turned slowly and moved forward in the direction of Ludgate hill.

For a space he continued his course, then, reaching Bonville street, he turned sharply to the right and made his way down the slight incline that leads to the embankment. There he paused and drew a long breath. The sense of space and darkness soothed him. Pulling his cap over his eyes, he crossed to the river and walked on in the direction of Westminster bridge.

As he walked the great mass of water by his side looked dense and smooth as oil with its sweeping width and network

of reflected light. On its farther bank rose the tall buildings, the chimneys, the flaring lights that suggest another and an alien London. Close at hand stretched the solid stone parapet, giving assurance of protection.

All these things he saw with his mental eyes, but with his mental eyes only, for his physical gaze was fixed ahead where the houses of parliament loomed out of the dusk. From the great buildings his eyes never wavered until the embankment was traversed and Westminster bridge reached. Then he paused, resting his arms on the coping of the bridge.

In the tense quietude of the darkness the place looked vast and inspiring. The shadowy terrace, the silent river, the rows of lighted windows, each was significant. Slowly and comprehensively his glance passed from one to the other. He was no sentimentalist and no dreamer. His act was simply the act of a man whose interests, robbed of their natural outlet, turn instinctively toward the forms and symbols of the work that is denied them. His scrutiny was steady—even cold. He was raised to no exaltation by the vastness of the building, nor was he chilled by any dwarfing of himself. He looked at it long and thoughtfully; then, again moving slowly, he turned and retraced his steps.

His mind was full as he walked back, still oblivious of the stone parapet of the embankment, the bare trees and the flaring lights of the advertisements across the water. Turning to the left, he regained Fleet street and made for his own habitation with the quiet acuity that some men exhibit in moments of absorption.

He crossed Cliffe's inn with the same slow, almost listless, step; then, as his own doorway came into view, he stopped. Some one was standing in its recess.

For a moment he wondered if his fancy were playing him a trick. Then his reason sprang to certainty with so fierce a leap that for an instant his mind recoiled. For we more often stand agnost at the strength of our own feelings than before the enormity of our neighbor's actions.

"Is that you, Chilcote?" he said below his breath.

At the sound of his voice the other wheeled round. "Hello!" he said. "I

thought you were the ghost of some old inhabitant. I suppose I am very unexpected?"

Leder took the hand that he extended and pressed the fingers unconsciously. The sight of this man was like the finding of an oasis at the point where the desert is sandiest, deadliest, most unbearable.

"Yes, you are—unexpected," he answered.

Chilcote looked at him, then looked out into the court. "I'm done up," he said. "I'm right at the end of the tether." He laughed as he said it, but in the dim light of the hall Leder thought his face looked ill and harassed despite the flush that the excitement of the meeting had brought to it. Taking his arm, he drew him toward the stairs.

"So the rope has run out, eh?" he said, in imitation of the other's tone. But under the quiet of his manner his own nerves were throbbing with the peculiar alertness of anticipation, a sudden sense of mastery over life that lifted him above surroundings and above persons—a sense of stature, mental and physical, from which he surveyed the world. He felt as if fate in the moment of utter darkness had given him a sign.

As they crossed the hall Chilcote had drawn away and was already mounting the stairs. And as Leder followed it came sharply to his mind that here, in the slipshod freedom of a door that was always open and stairs that were innocent of covering, lay his companion's real niche—unrecognized in outward avowal, but acknowledged by the inward, keener sense that manifests the individual.

In silence they mounted the stairs, but on the first landing Chilcote paused and looked back, surveying Leder from the superior height of two steps.

"I did very well at first," he said. "I did very well. I almost followed your example for a week or so. I found myself on a sort of pinnacle, and I clung on. But in the last ten days I've— I've rather lapsed."

"Why?" Leder avoided looking at his face. He kept his eyes fixed determinedly on the spot where his own hand gripped the banister.

(Continued on Page Six.)

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